# MANCHESTER COLLEGE, OXFORD.

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# VISITOR'S ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY THE

# REV. S. A. STEINTHAL,

JUNE 25TH, 1896.

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*"The College adheres to its original principle of freely imparting Theological knowledge without insisting on the adoption of particular Theological doctrines."*

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# ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN,

No doubt you will have shared my disappointment in my being obliged to fill this chair to-day, instead of Professor Max Müller occupying it. We had been looking forward with much interest and pleasure to welcoming him here, especially as we should have had the opportunity of expressing to him our gratification in the well-deserved honour which the Queen has so lately conferred upon him. Instead of the wise counsel and the fruit of rich learning which he would have offered to you, I have only my sincere sympathy in your work, and my lengthened experience, to lay before you. I cannot hope to shed any new light upon your studies or duties, though I may congratulate you on another College year drawing to its close, and the prospect of your entering upon the practical work of your life being so much nearer.

It is a long time, almost fifty years, since I became a student of what was then Manchester New College; but I have not forgotten the mingled feelings with which, so long ago, I greeted each concluding year, longing for the opportunity to enter upon the sacred work to which I had, like you, devoted myself, yet doubting whether I were really fitted to undertake so solemn and arduous a task. Very many changes have taken place in the years that have since elapsed. Our presence in this city, rich in such noble memories, was impossible then. Some enthusiastic dreamers ventured to anticipate, as a kind of millennial future, the possibility of the national Universities opening their gates without demanding signature to articles and creeds. I hardly think that any, even of those who were most sanguine in their hopes,

ever thought that Nonconformist theological schools would be established among the venerable Colleges of Oxford and of Cambridge, and would receive the kindly welcome which has been afforded to us so freely. A grave responsibility rests upon us now to prove ourselves worthy of the opportunities placed at our disposal. While the national seats of learning were closed to our students, it was not without excusable pride that we could name men, trained in our academies, who could rank as the equals of the best sons of the Universities in scholarship and theological learning. Some of them, we are thankful to know, are living amongst us still. On you—the students of a happier and a more auspicious day—rests the responsibility of showing yourselves worthy of your opportunities, and proving yourselves the fit successors of the men who, for generations, have upheld the tradition of a learned and a spiritually-minded ministry.

Some fifty years ago there were certain branches of theological study which our Nonconformist academies could almost say they pursued alone. That higher criticism which Germany had begun to pursue successfully long before our English scholars ventured to study its lessons, had been followed by some of our leading men. But all the writers who bore a German name were spoken of then by most religious men as dangerous theologians. It was an uncommon thing for anyone to discriminate, and to learn that there were as conservative theologians in Germany as elsewhere. Tholuk and Ebrard were once as much dreaded as Strauss or Baur; and it required no small courage to be known as a student of German theology. Even in our Free Churches there was not a complete readiness to receive the teaching of these modern enquirers. I had a curious instance of this soon after leaving College, when a friend of mine told me that my name had been before a congregation as their possible minister, and that it was rejected purely because, having a Teutonic ring, it was feared

that I might be touched with neologian tendencies. Very moderate views on Biblical Criticism, which to-day are the common property of all who claim any position among theologians, exposed their defenders, a generation ago, to persecution. If *Essays and Reviews* had been published to-day they would not have caused any excitement, and Bishop Colenso might have criticised the Pentateuch without incurring the condemnation he incurred, nor would Dr. Davidson have been obliged to resign his professorship had he now published his learned volume on the Old Testament.

How changed is not the theological world since those days. Among the foremost scientific critics, both of the Old and New Testaments, among the leading expositors of Biblical books, and among historians of the Church, we can now claim English writers who hold their own with the profoundest scholars of the Continent; and the best works which Germany and Holland have contributed to such studies are, in translation, circulated among all students of divinity.

There are not a few of us, who remember the old days, who are surprised to find that this undeniable increase of a better appreciation of the character of the Scriptures has not, as yet, had a greater influence upon the credal foundation demanded by many of the churches into which Christendom is divided in English-speaking communities; and we are somewhat grieved to find that the work which, from its foundation, our College has found its special function in pursuing, seems still as needful as it was in 1786. We welcome with true gratification the rich stores of learning which Oxford, but not Oxford alone, has contributed to the sacred studies which are the especial subjects to which the student preparing himself for ministerial work must make all other studies subordinate; and we honour very highly, for their work's sake, the men whom it is not needful to name whose labours have given so much clearness to the elucidation of

Hebrew literature and history, to the purification of the text, and the exposition of the New Testament books, and whose researches into the history of the Oriental nations, whose monuments, only lately brought again to the light of day, have shed so much light on the early stages of religious life. But we still feel, though we recognise the sincerity and truthfulness of each individual critic and scholar, that our witness to absolute freedom from all tests is needed, if theology is to hold her rightful place among scientific studies. Her work deals with the noblest departments of human thought and knowledge, and pursuing truth in the sacred fields where the great source of all truth has been pleased to make His "way known upon earth, His saving health among all nations," we feel assured that no artificial limitation of article or creed should be allowed to interfere with the fullest and freest exercise of human intelligence. Why, in this peculiar study of things divine, men should have ever deemed it right to lay down in advance a definite outline of the results at which they must arrive, has always been to me a mystery; and how men whose work has proved them undeniably to be truthful and earnest can harmonise with theology what they would repudiate in every other branch of study, passes my comprehension. True reverence for the working of the Spirit of Truth, and a recognition that its diffusion should be absolutely unchecked, seems to me to demand that, in the attempt to read aright the laws and ways by which God has been pleased to reveal Himself to man, the mind should be left in absolute freedom to search for truth, and be absolutely independent of every consideration but its fullest discovery. And though our College may not be able to add from its small numbers to the roll of names which have rendered Oxford so illustrious wherever learning and scholarship are prized, it has its own peculiar work to do, and that not a mean one, of showing that theology may be successfully studied, as our first Principal, Dr. Barnes, declared it would be in

Manchester College, "free from any subscriptions, tests, or obligations inconsistent with the sacred rights of truth and conscience."

Gentlemen, it is your high privilege to be called to this study under conditions which many of your predecessors would have welcomed with unspeakable gratitude; and I can assure you that the supporters of the College look to you with very high hopes and anticipations. May I venture to point out to you, that in the future which lies before you the most faithful consecration of yourselves to the work to which you have devoted yourselves will not secure for you those secular rewards or honours which you might attain if, under less free conditions, you did the same work which you will, I trust, do. As yet, that work itself must, to a great degree, be its own reward. The free pursuit of theology, and the cultivation of a spiritual religion which knows no limitations of creed, open to the faithful soul the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven, but give no promise of material prosperity. But you were well aware, when you chose the work to which you have consecrated your lives, what the sacrifices were you would have to bring, and, on the other hand, what great and hallowed gifts you would receive if, with fidelity, you gave yourselves to your pure and divine task. While pursuing your studies here and accumulating, under the guidance of your learned tutors, rich stores of knowledge, you are learning what is far more precious than any immediate knowledge can be, the best methods of study, and the characteristic notes of true scholarship. In future years your days may be spent, nay, assuredly in most cases will be spent, where you will not have the rich stores around you from which, at present, you can at any moment draw what you need; and I trust that you may not have, as many of us have had to do, to regret that you did not make all the use you might have done of your student days.

There does lie before you the prospect of most useful and

noble work, although it has no prizes such as other professions can offer, with which to tempt you on. But then the work is in itself its own reward. For what is its character, and what its mode of operation? The great aim of our ministry is to proclaim the truth, as far as we know it, and to promote holiness and righteousness among men. It is to obtain the knowledge needed for the first, and to learn the best ways of adding to that knowledge by independent research, that the years you spend here should be employed, and you cannot too faithfully devote yourselves to this important task. When the old students of the College had the privilege, a few years ago, of presenting to Dr. Martineau an address of congratulation and thankfulness, he, in his reply, pointed out to us one thing which we cannot too frequently insist upon, and that is, the importance of special diligence in the pursuit of studies which do not appeal to our especial tastes; and he spoke earnestly of the necessity of believing that experienced teachers may know, better than their students, the relative importance of the different branches of knowledge in which they act as guides. Our course of studies offers a sufficient variety of options, and from no one branch of knowledge will you be able to gather really good fruit, unless you are careful to cultivate as well the stem, from which that branch draws its nourishment. In olden days men strove to have universal science, and literary history tells us of those who seemed to have encyclopedical knowledge. But the area of research has been indefinitely widened since those giants lived, and more and more are students now-a-days compelled to specialise. If that work of specialisation begins too soon, the student's learning may be deep, but it is narrow; and I trust that you may share my strong conviction that, to specialise efficiently, you must have a wide range of sound preliminary knowledge.

For the performance, also, of your future duties you must not allow your interests to be narrowed into any one narrow groove.

The practical work of the ministry calls men to take a living interest in all things which concern humanity, and requires that the efficient minister should know sufficient to be able to connect all things with the central spring of all life in God. You will not know too much, however deeply you may study here, and you will not be vain of your learning however great it may be, if only that learning be sound, for the more thorough your knowledge is the more conscious of its limitations will you be. But the more thorough your studies have been, the better able will you be to make them useful to the least cultivated and untrained of your future congregations, for it is completeness of knowledge which makes it easy to explain, and variety of knowledge which helps in illustration.

The work of the preacher is always full of difficulty. A great politician, perhaps the most eloquent orator of his day, is reported to have said, he could not understand how men could every week of their lives deliver two sermons on the same subject. I have often thought this story apocryphal, as Mr. Bright was a very sincerely religious man, and must have known that although our weekly sermons ought always to be religious, yet religion is co-extensive with human nature, and the whole varied compass of human life can be dealt with from a religious point of view; while I believe that our best preachers would never pretend to offer to their congregations two new sermons every week. The late Dr. Furness, it is true, went to the opposite extreme, and declared that in his long life he had but preached one sermon, with variations. But this subject of preaching is one I trust to which even in your student days you will pay no small attention, as, after all, the greater part of a minister's work will inevitably be his pulpit work. To deal with the least important, but not unimportant, portion first, do not think that elocution should be neglected. Very many excellent discourses are wasted because they are badly delivered. You cannot be too

clear in your enunciation, nor over careful that your manner of delivery proves you to be in earnest in what you say. Nor can you be too heedful as to your style, that it be simple and clear. Read and study the best standard authors, both prose and poetical, to make your store of pure English rich; above all things, keep ever fresh in mind the matchless sublimity of Biblical English, and avoid every temptation to use what is called fine language. These may seem trifling things on which to dwell, but nothing is trifling which adds to the preacher's power, and a good style and a clear delivery are no small furtherance in the preacher's work.

But, of course, the main consideration must be the matter which, in his best and most effective manner, he week by week addresses to his congregation. And here, above all things, he must remember that his great aim must always be to lift the souls of his hearers above the changing circumstances of earth into the abiding realities of the Kingdom of Heaven, and consequently his preaching must deal with fundamental principles rather than with matters of temporary interest. The secret why we can always find fresh meaning in the time-worn words of the Scriptures lies just in this, that they deal with the great underlying truths on which all faith and morality rest, and which are of never ceasing-concern to men. If we are able to awaken in the souls of men an abiding trust in God, and an ever-changing aspiration after communion with Him, we need not fear that in any special time of trial or temptation our hearers will stray from the right path.

Some men are very ready to speak of the diminishing power of the pulpit as compared with that of the newspaper press, and dwell upon the fact that the newspaper deals with every particular question which attracts the attention of society. They suggest that, if the pulpit is to regain the power which they assert it has lost, the preacher must take up similar topics to the journalist,

so that instead of the usual sermons, he should, as it were, speak a couple of leading articles every Sunday. I have no hesitation in declaring my belief that any thing which approached such a method would be destructive to the true life of our churches. Not that I think any of the subjects which concern the social or political life of the nation are unworthy of the preacher's concern, but that I believe that the few hours we have, each week, for the service of the Sanctuary, should be devoted to the consideration of those deeper and more solemn considerations which, by moulding the inner man of the heart in accordance with the image of God, will produce so high a purpose in life, and so pure an aim in all conduct, that every act, whether political, social, or domestic, will be guided by divine impulse, and life become one constant stream of religious service. What sacred lessons will not be learned, if we can but impress upon the mind of everyone the essential unity of the teaching of Conscience with the unchangeable and eternal will of God. We should consecrate life to its true religious purpose, and conduct guided by such lofty aims would sanctify every thing a man could do, to the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is true that religion has to deal with every possible concern of life, and that the preacher, therefore, must be free to bring her hallowed principles to bear upon them all, but it must not be from the changing ground of transient expediency that you speak, but from abiding obligations to the law of God. And this constant communion with God, that should be the inspiration of the preacher, will make the pulpit no mere source of ethical or social guidance. It will lift the hearer and the preacher alike into that higher realm of spiritual peace where all the changing conditions of being, its trials and its joys, its doubts, its trusts, will be consecrated by that Christian spirit of faith and love which it is the great aim of the ministry to which you have devoted yourselves to establish among men.

I know no higher or nobler purpose than this in which to use the best powers which God has given to man; and earnestly do I pray that you may know, even to the full, how blessed it is to receive a call unto this work, and to be faithful in hearkening to the summons.